



Jasmine in the Middle Kingdom: Autopsy of China's (Failed) Revolution

By Dale Swartz

China's version of the Arab world's "Jasmine Revolution" was a complete failure. Online calls for protests against Communist Party rule have elicited little response from would-be protesters. Yet Beijing's reaction was swift and overwhelming—harassing reporters, jailing dissidents, and ramping up its already-aggressive censorship of the Internet. Such tactics have left those both inside and outside the country puzzled. Why are China's leaders overreacting? Maybe they are not. The factors underlying this movement could prove lethal to the regime if left unaddressed. Future challenges will make tackling the problem even more difficult.

On April 3, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei vanished from Beijing's airport. Noted for such iconic designs as the 2008 Olympic "Bird's Nest" stadium, Ai is also a visible activist for free speech in China and an ardent critic of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The government later confirmed that he has been detained on vague "economic charges." Most observers now suspect that his arrest is an attempt to silence his human-rights campaign, and Ai is not the only protester to disappear. Dissent is hardly an easy undertaking in China, a country infamous for its capricious use of police and judicial power. Over the past several weeks—while the world's eyes have been elsewhere—the government has waged a truly unprecedented crackdown. But its underpinnings are rather curious.

It began simply enough. In early February, during the dramatic final days of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Egypt, pictures circled the globe of the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square. In one, a young man holds a poster reading: "The people of Egypt demand that President Mubarak resign." There was nothing overly unusual about this sign—except that the text was in Chinese.

Dale Swartz (dale.swartz@aei.org) is a research assistant at AEI.

In Egyptian Arabic the expression "it's all Greek to me" refers instead to Chinese, so this message was partially a critique of Mubarak's indifference to the needs of his people. But these

Key points in this Outlook:

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has cracked down heavily on dissent and activism in the past few weeks, notably arresting free-speech activist and CCP critic Ai Weiwei, in the aftermath of calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" in the country.
- While an Arab-style revolt in China is unlikely in the short term, some of the underlying structural similarities are striking.
- Although China experiences many thousands of mass civil disturbances annually, this new movement frightens the CCP because it comes from a powerful source: a core middle class stymied by its lack of opportunity and political freedom.
- The CCP must address these grievances or risk a mortal threat to the regime.

posters were placed directly in front of the television cameras, and Egypt's youthful, democratic revolutionaries made clear that they saw the prospect of contagion in their work. A strongly authoritarian state like China, many surmised, might well be a future stop for the "Jasmine Revolution."¹ ("Today we are all Egyptians," Ai tweeted on February 11. "It took merely 18 days for the collapse of this 30-year-old military regime—one which looked harmonious and stable. This thing [the CCP] that has existed for 60 years may take several months.")

And soon enough, anonymous calls began appearing on a variety of Chinese websites for a series of protests in a dozen of China's major cities. These "strolls" (a common Chinese euphemism for demonstrations, since all "protest" activity must be pre-cleared with the authorities—a request rarely granted) were meant to be the first steps toward holding the party accountable for its inadequacies in providing for the people's welfare and freedoms.

At the first scheduled Sunday stroll in Beijing, several hundred people congregated in front of a McDonald's on one of the city's busiest avenues. Yet most were curious onlookers and reporters covering the potential event. Other than the intriguing sight of US ambassador Jon Huntsman in the area, this "stroll" garnered scant attention, either inside or outside the country.² No more than a handful was actually protesting. Very few people appeared in Shanghai, and no one showed up in the other designated cities. The web-based organizers encouraged repeat occurrences, every Sunday, to improve on this meager showing. But week after week, no one came. By March, it was obvious that the "revolution" had been an abject failure.

Before the media's focus shifted to the war in Libya and the Japanese earthquake, commentators settled on a uniform, simplistic theme to explain the lack of revolutionary zeal in the People's Republic: "China is not Egypt."³ While in the Arab world the state is the problem, the logic goes, the Chinese government has engineered a monumental economic and societal transformation that has tremendously benefited its people. Hundreds of millions have ascended from profound poverty. Why would the Chinese people overthrow—or even question—the regime under such circumstances?

Beijing Silences Protesters—Why?

After trying to ignore the issue altogether, ultimately the CCP itself weighed in, arguing in a *People's Daily* editorial that China is "definitely not" the Middle East: "[China]

is a formerly backward and impoverished nation that has been turned into the second biggest economy in terms of gross domestic output, and the whole world holds it in high esteem. All these feats are owed to the wise leadership and scientific guidance of the CCP."⁴

Yet stopping at this facile conclusion does not unravel the complexities surrounding the episode. Indeed, what is most intriguing about the course of this phenomenon is not why the participation level was so low—it is Beijing's swift and overwhelming response.

At the height of the uprising in Cairo, Chinese Internet users found all references to "Egypt" blocked or deleted. A potential "stroller" discovered hundreds of uniformed and plain-clothes policemen, and their numbers increased weekly (along with their supporting equipment). Barriers were built around most of the protest sites; in Beijing, subway service was reportedly cut in the student-dominated area of the city to prevent anyone from traveling to the location at all. Prominent human-rights and democracy activists were jailed; by the count of one advocacy group, the government has arrested approximately thirty, an equal number have simply vanished, and more than two hundred have been put under "soft detention."⁵ As in Egypt and elsewhere, journalists were harassed, and some have been roughed up or detained.⁶

This dramatic reaction seems at odds with both the CCP's public pronouncements and the conventional wisdom among foreign experts and media. If China is "definitely not" like Egypt, why would the entire security apparatus be unleashed on this nascent, seemingly inconsequential movement?

The Legacy of Tiananmen. The evidence seems to support three layered explanations for Beijing's paranoid behavior. The first is a function of the CCP's approach to internal stability: it reacted the way it always does. All protests are viewed through the prism of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and subsequent crackdown. Recent evidence suggests that the party came very close to collapse during this tumultuous period. Since then, the orthodoxy dictates that all popular movements and nonsanctioned political ideas be crushed—quickly and absolutely.

In many ways the Arab revolts, particularly in Egypt, seem uncomfortably close to China in 1989: mass demonstrations against an unresponsive government; a renewed sense of nationalism among an idealist youth population; and crowds pitching tents in the national square, shouting slogans against corruption and rule by fiat.

In the post-Tiananmen era, China's internal security apparatus has become remarkably sophisticated and effective in quelling such unauthorized forms of dissent, as demonstrated by the Jasmine reaction. This is partly due to a massive investment in internal security; spending in this area will exceed total military expenditures this year, according to Chinese budget projections.⁷ But its efficacy is also a credit to the regime's numerous opportunities for practice. China experiences upwards of ninety thousand mass civil disturbances annually; the 2008 uprising in Tibet and the 2009 Uighur Muslim riots in far-western Xinjiang Province are particularly noteworthy for their severity. It was here that state security forces pioneered techniques for restricting journalist access to "sensitive" areas and selectively shutting down Internet and mobile phone service.

While both the media and the Internet have been crucial in the timing and spread of this year's Middle Eastern revolutions, neither is allowed such influence in China. Al-Jazeera, the pan-Arab satellite network, has no analogue in the Beijing-run CCP propaganda monopolies. Foreign media outlets have found their access in China (especially Beijing) curtailed over the past few weeks. And, of course, the People's Republic is renowned for its world-class Internet censorship regime—one where Western social media sites (like Facebook and Twitter) are blocked and where many other sites are heavily restricted. A plethora of search terms like "jasmine" has been excised. (Some Chinese "netizens" pointed out that in one banned video, President Hu Jintao is seen singing a popular, patriotic folk song that happens to have "jasmine" in the title.⁸) Popular e-mail services like Gmail have also reported interference by the "Great Firewall of China." On the whole, these actions appear less like temporary restrictions than a sustained move toward stricter information control. In one particularly startling example, China's most prestigious university has announced that it will begin to screen students for "radical thoughts."⁹

Deeper Problems. Censorship and media crackdowns led to a lack of information, while the show of force dissuaded those who might have participated in the protests. But did it matter? Would the movement have spread if left unchecked? The state's response clearly indicates that the CCP feared it would. This leads to the second reason

for the harsh response: the problems China faces are greater than the authorities will admit publicly.

Consider some of the slogans suggested for the protests: 我们要吃饭、我们要工作、我们要住房! (We want to eat, we want to work, we want housing!) and 我们要公平、我们要正义! (We want fairness, we want justice!) These desires for opportunity and the rule of law seem neither extreme nor subversive. They are, however, remarkably close to the calls for change propelling those in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere.

How are these problems reflected in the specific case of China? Some are short term. Rising food prices, exacerbated by a prolonged drought in the north of the country, are just one indicator of the high inflation levels

eroding much of the economic gains achieved by ordinary Chinese in recent years.¹⁰ Housing prices along China's urbanized coast are soaring well beyond the rate of income growth (having more than tripled from 2005 to 2009).¹¹ The "bubble" in property values has proved particularly vexing to young men, since homeownership is a traditional prerequisite for attracting a wife.

Structural weaknesses in the Chinese system are also proving a challenge. Foreign reports often caricature the country as a veritable boomtown, where jobs are plentiful and incomes are high. Yet such conventional wisdom only holds true for a limited subset of the population. A large proportion of China's annual 6 million-plus university graduates is struggling to find work, since the white-collar service economy they train for is too small to accommodate them all. The oversupply subsequently affects their earning potential; over the past decade, wages have remained essentially flat for this cohort. In an odd twist, annual income for unskilled migrant workers has doubled over the same period.¹²

The incentives for workers to move from the agricultural interior to the thriving coastal cities are strong. Despite extensive government intervention, rural residents make less than a third of the earnings of their urban counterparts. But the *hukou* (residence permit) system constrains rural inhabitants in particular from legally moving eastward, since a valid permit is necessary for access to schooling, housing, and other vital services. Even so, an ever-increasing proportion is willing to undertake the risk; by the government's most recent count, this "floating population" now numbers more than 220 million. This statistic reflects both the serious

In China, all protests
are viewed through
the prism of the
1989 Tiananmen
demonstrations.

risk for social instability and the staggering inequality present in China's population.

Someone must be on top in such an unequal society—in this case, no one has it better than the CCP membership. After all, they control nearly all of China's state-owned enterprises, the key driver of the country's 9 percent-plus annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth. (The newly emergent, entrepreneurial middle class sees very little of these profits.) Yet no force both heightens their power and endangers their legitimacy as much as corruption. Corruption is no stranger to Chinese politics; the traditional *guanxi* practice (social networks interlinked with family ties) has always been greased by bribery and kickbacks. But along with outright theft and misappropriation of public funds, these practices amount to a massive economic drain; the scholar Minxin Pei estimates that they cost China at least 3 percent of GDP annually.¹³ (For perspective, this figure equals the total economic output of Vietnam and Bangladesh—combined.) Many of the public protests and grievances in China can be traced directly to such instances of government officials' abuse of power, especially relating to property rights.

A New Threat to the Regime. Corruption, inequality, unemployment, and inflation could all sow the seeds of unrest in China, but alone they are not enough to fully explain Beijing's fear of Jasmine. It is the third reason that is most revealing: this protest movement is fundamentally different. Historically, the country's most frequent threats have come from the periphery; witness the wars fought against the Mongols, Manchus, and Russians in the frontiers of Central Asia. The trend continues into the present with the uprisings by Muslims in Xinjiang, the Tibetan riots, and (in the eyes of many Chinese) the constant rabble-rousing by the foreign press corps.

The Arab Spring is different because it represents a wholly internal phenomenon: the displeasure among the citizenry with the functioning and representation of its government. The CCP's argument that it is protected by China's economic progress is negated by Egypt's experience—after all, that country's standards of living increased markedly over the past few years. The Egyptian people determined that it was too little, too late.

The party has never had to deal with a challenge to its rule by the core ethnic Han population, which

accounts for over 90 percent of its people. After all, the last time this happened was 1949—the culmination of a bloody, twenty-year civil war. Tiananmen, by contrast, was a much narrower phenomenon, led in large part by elite students who were children of CCP members. The Arab Spring was instigated in large part by both frustrated, educated youth (which China has in abundance) and a middle class stymied by its lack of autonomy (precisely the group the CCP courts assiduously). For nearly thirty years, the social contract in China between the CCP and the people has been relatively simple: “leave

the exercise of political power to us and we will make you rich.” Has the regime truly delivered on its promise to raise living standards for everyone? Can it sustain its level of growth? If not, the constituencies it relies on may decide that too little has been done—too late.

Moreover, this is a sensitive time in Chinese politics. Hu's generation of leadership is poised to stand down next year, and a fever-pitch battle is underway for control of the CCP before the 2012 National Peo-

ple's Congress.¹⁴ Past experience suggests that Chinese leadership struggles coincide with periods of social unrest, like the 1989 Tiananmen protests and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The major factions feel vulnerable and are attempting to exert influence; the regime's behavior over the past few months reveals a great degree of insecurity and disinclination to repair the situation.

Conclusion

Ultimately China will have to learn the lesson that the Soviet Union discovered in the years leading to its demise: while addressing the problem now is inordinately difficult, putting it off until later will result in an impossible situation. Indeed, China's window for fixing its “seeds of unrest” is rapidly closing, as a number of long-term trends conspire against it. Demographically, the country's working-age population will peak in just three years and decline thereafter, significantly impacting China's greatest competitive advantage (cheap, plentiful labor) and cooling economic growth. China's shrinking pool of young workers will be forced to care for more and more of their elderly parents and grandparents; the cohort over age sixty-five is expected to double between now and 2030.¹⁵ The fraying social safety net means that the Chinese will have little to rely on in terms of pensions or health care.

China's most
prestigious university
has announced that
it will begin to
screen students for
“radical thoughts.”

Environmental concerns will assume a larger presence as the country consumes its natural resources, poisons its rivers, and pollutes its air. Inequality and corruption are not going away, either—and if left unchecked they will continue to spiral out of control.

This is hardly to say that the country is doomed. After all, it has been confounding predictions by contrarians for decades. The CCP was successful in fending off the challenge posed by the Jasmine Revolution—at least in the short run. But the serious, looming problems in the years ahead mean that China's rulers should act now to be more responsive to the problems their people face. Otherwise, even unlimited security resources will not be enough to stave off a serious challenge to the regime.

Notes

1. In the mold of the “color revolutions” that swept across the states of the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s, Tunisia's uprising was frequently labeled the “Jasmine Revolution.” (This year's Middle Eastern uprisings first began in Tunisia.) While most people now refer to the Middle Eastern phenomenon as the “Arab Spring,” referring to “jasmine” in China has persisted, owing to the cultural and linguistic affinities for the term.
2. “Jon Huntsman, US Ambassador to China, Spotted at Jasmine Revolution Protests in Beijing [Video],” Huffington Post, February 24, 2011.
3. For notable examples, see Peter Rutland and Orion Lewis, “Why It Won't Happen in China,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2011; and David Piling, “Why the Chinese Are Not Inspired by Egypt,” *Financial Times*, February 16, 2011.
4. “China Is Definitely Not the Middle East,” *Renmin Ribao* [People's Daily], March 10, 2011, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90780/91342/7314966.html> (accessed April 7, 2011).
5. “Escalating Crackdown following Call for ‘Jasmine Revolution’ in China,” Chinese Human Rights Defenders, <http://chrnet.org/2011/03/31/escalating-crackdown-following-call-for-‘jasmine-revolution’-in-china> (accessed April 7, 2011).
6. See Jeremy Page and James T. Areddy, “China Takes Heavy Hand to Light Protests,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 27, 2011; Eunice Yoon, “Getting Harassed by the Chinese Police,” CNN.com, February 28, 2011, <http://business.blogs.cnn.com/2011/02/28/getting-harassed-by-the-chinese-police> (accessed April 7, 2011); and “China Must Stop Crackdown on Foreign Reporters,” Amnesty International, March 3, 2011, www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/china-must-stop-crackdown-foreign-reporters-2011-03-03 (accessed April 7, 2011).
7. Chris Buckley, “China Internal Security Spending Jumps Past Army Budget,” Reuters, March 5, 2011.
8. “No Awakening, But Crush It Anyway,” *The Economist*, March 3, 2011. The video can be viewed on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXVL3Tttqgk (accessed April 7, 2011).
9. Peter Foster, “Peking University to Screen Students for ‘Radical Thoughts,’” *Telegraph*, March 28, 2011.
10. Minxin Pei, “China's Bumpy Ride Ahead,” *The Diplomat*, February 16, 2011.
11. Ibid.
12. Andrew Jacobs, “China's Army of Graduates Struggles for Jobs,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2011.
13. Minxin Pei, “Corruption Threatens China's Future” (Policy Brief 55, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, October 2007).
14. For a detailed analysis of the subject, see the Hoover Institution's *China Leadership Monitor*. The most current issue (no. 34) can be found here: www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/7216.
15. These calculations are derived from the US Census Bureau, International Database, www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb (accessed April 7, 2011); and the United National Population Division, “World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision,” <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp2008/index.htm> (accessed April 7, 2011).